## PRELIMINARY AMENDMENT

Please amend the above-identified application as follows:

**In the Specification:**

In the Title:

Please replace the Title with the following amended Title:

Processes for Packaging [[Perishable and Other]] Case Ready Meat Products

In the Abstract:

Please replace the Abstract with the following amended paragraph:

Packaging and processes for facilitating fast, efficient, and reliable production line packaging of case ready meat products[[, and more particularly perishable products including meat products]]. Product trays according to the present invention are formed of non-foam plastic material with three dimensional structure and configuration that imparts an esthetically pleasing appearance and feel to the customer at the point of sale, as well as offering to the consumer a container that is microwavable, dishwasher safe and freezer safe in addition, if desired, to being recyclable. Such packaging and processes are particularly useful in newly emerging automated supply chains where inventory sales are tracked to support centralized processing of meat [[and other perishable]] products at centralized facilities for shipment to geographically distant points of sale. In these situations, the packaging must present the requisite esthetic, convenience and performance qualities to the customer at the point of sale even after having been loaded into a shipment container, transported often by truck over hundreds of miles, unpacked and placed in the product display case. Non-foam containers according to the present invention can accomplish these results by featuring separation structure to permit manufacture, storage, stacking, shipment, and dispensing on processing lines with minimum chance or potential of the sort of locking together which can otherwise occur with non-foam containers.

In Column 2, please replace the paragraph starting at line 56 with the following amended paragraph:

Consumers also prefer convenience, in addition to aesthetically pleasing packaging. Retailers can offer a distinct advantage to the customer if they can present meat products in containers that are microwavable, dishwasher safe and thus reusable, and freezer safe. In addition, it is or may be preferable to offer case ready meat [[perishable foods]] packaging that is recyclable, such as suitable for curbside pickup and [[recyclilng]] recycling.

In Column 2, please replace the paragraph starting at line 64 with the following amended paragraph:

In sum, in the current economy, where automation and more efficient business practices generally are driving competition in the grocery industry, grocers must explore every avenue to become more efficient and customer oriented. In this climate, any labor intensive tasks which can be reduced need to be evaluated, including whether it continues to make economic sense to distribute meat products based on localized butchering at the point of sale. These new automation and business techniques, combined with labor expense in the current climate gives rise for the first time to the possibility of more centralized butchering combined with automated, sophisticated supply chain support of the meat case at the local retail grocery operation. This new climate, however, requires new and innovative packaging for [[perishable products, such as]] case ready meat products. Not only must the packaging be at least as visually and tactilely pleasing to the customer as conventional meat product packaging. It must also be sufficiently sturdy and robust to survive not only normal wear and tear at the point of sale, but also packing at a centralized facility, transportation in a truck or other transportation unit sometimes for hundreds

of miles, unpacking onto the loading dock, and placement in the meat display. It would be even more preferable to form the packaging of material that is microwavable, dishwasher safe and freezer safe, and even more preferably recyclable.

In Column 3, please replace the paragraph starting at line 24 with the following amended paragraph:

The present invention provides new forms of case ready meat packaging and processes for manufacturing and using such packages. The packaging features requisite visual, tactile, esthetic and performance (microwavability, dishwasher safety, freezer safety, and if desired, recyclability) qualities to please the customer as well as requisite increased robustness and sturdiness required to survive distribution in more centralized meat processing supply chains according to evolving inventory control, manufacturing and distribution automation systems and processes and logistic processes. Such packaging and processes reflect and accommodate, more generally, an increased drive for efficiency and customer satisfaction in the continually evolving grocery industry.

In Column 5, please replace the paragraph starting at line 64 with the following amended paragraph:

It is accordingly an object of the present invention to provide plastic packaging for [[products, preferably perishable products, more preferably]] case ready meat products, which offers acceptable point of sale appearance and feel, requisite convenience and performance for the consumer, adequate robustness to maintain such appearance and feel even after centralized packaging, shipment, and point of sale wear and tear and yet facilitate and not interrupt the fast and continuous packaging process lines necessary to support centralized processing and packaging, and distribution supply chains.

In Column 6, please replace the paragraph starting line 7 with the following amended paragraph:

It is an additional object of the present invention to provide trays which feature structural, convenience, performance and esthetic qualities for optimizing packaging of [[perishable food products such as]] case ready meat products, which products must be stacked and transported over long distances before reaching the point of sale.

In Column 6, please replace the paragraph starting at line 14 with the following amended paragraph:

It is an additional object of the present invention to provide [[perishable food]] case ready meat packaging processes which facilitate centralized and automated [[perishable]] product packaging and distribution in an automated supply chain and yet yield a product which equals or exceeds the esthetic, convenience and performance and other functional requirements of conventional locally butchered and packaged meat products.

In Column 6, please replace the paragraph starting at line 21 with the following amended paragraph:

It is an additional object of the present invention to provide [[perishable food]] case ready meat packaging which features structure, esthetic qualities, rigidity, and durability to facilitate automated inventory tracking and control techniques such as reliable labeling with bar coding, sensing by electromechanical or optical sensors, and other qualities which facilitate automated sensing, product control, and product handling required in automated supply chain systems.

In Column 6, please replace the paragraph starting at line 28 with the following amended paragraph:

It is an additional object of the present invention to provide new forms of [[perishable product]] case ready meat packaging which saves on material cost and manufacturing costs by using nonfoam structures combined with three dimensionality such as ribs and flanges to provide a cost efficient solution for an automated supply chain environment where pleasing the customer remains paramount.

In Column 6, please replace the paragraph starting at line 41 with the following amended paragraph:

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a [[perishable]] case ready meat product packaged unit according to the present invention.

In Column 7, please replace the paragraph starting at line 9 with the following amended paragraph:

FIG. 14 is a schematic side elevational view of a stack of trays according to one embodiment of the present invention in a feeder for deployment onto a [[perishable]] case ready meat product packaging process or line.

In Column 7, please replace the paragraph starting at line 21 with the following amended paragraph:

FIG. 1 shows a preferred embodiment of a [[perishable]] case ready meat product packaging unit according to the present invention. [[The perishable product may be meat, vegetable product, or any other product subject to limited shelf life.]] In a preferred embodiment, the package unit 10 includes tray 12 which contains product

14 and is covered by with a wrap or other closure 16. The closure 16 may be thin film conventional wrap of any desired composition, or a more rigid plastic structure which may be bonded to tray 12 via adhesive, heat bonding, or it may be of any other desired material and connected to tray 12 in any way desired. Typically, the closure 16 is transparent or nearly so in order to allow the customer visual inspection of the product in an esthetically pleasing way, both visually and tactilely.

In Column 7, please replace the paragraph starting at line 43 with the following amended paragraph:

Product unit 10 generally and tray 12 more particularly are preferably engineered for a centralized and automated [[perishable]] <u>case ready meat</u> product packaging and distribution supply chain. Here, unit 10 and all components including tray 12 must not only present product 14 in an aesthetically pleasing way to the customer at the retail point of sale with attractive performance and convenience features such as mircrowavability, diswasher safety and freezer safety (in addition to, if desired recyclability), but they must also continue to support a pleasing appearance and feel to the customer at the point of sale even after they have been packaged in a distant location, packed in a shipping container and thus subjected to potential significant deformation by pounds of other product stacked on top, shipped over potentially long distances, deposited on the loading dock at the point of sale and unpacked and loaded into the display case. In any event, non-foam containers which accomplish results such as these must be constructed to dispense onto a production line with minimal potential to lock together, in order to prevent jamming the dispenser, dropping of multiple containers, and other sources of interruption of the production line.

In Column 10, please replace the paragraph starting at line 58 with the following amended paragraph:

According to one process of the present invention, an integrated [[perishable]] case ready meat product distribution system works as follows: At the point of sale, sale of a product unit such as a prepackaged T-bone steak is recorded. This may occur via bar code or other conventional SKU tracking techniques. After such capture of unit sale information, which is Step A shown in FIG. 16, unit sale information is reported to IT facility which may be any computer or data processing functionality located anywhere. Such IT facility has requisite processing, input/output, connectivity by data network or telecommunications network, and memory capacity to accommodate automated supply chain techniques. The reporting step is shown as B in FIG. 16. Unit sale information is processed by IT functionality 58 and, if desired, combined with other unit sale information and other information relating to the particular point of sale 57 and, if desired, other points of sale, and if desired other information about which inventory of product should be prepared and delivered to point of sale 57. This information is at least part of the basis for logistics information which IT functionality 58 sends to processing facility 60. IT functionality 58 may also track and manage information relating to transportation units. Such tracking is shown as Step D in FIG. 16. Transportation unit information can include information about location, manifest, and availability of trucks and other transportation units. IT functionality 58 can correlate transportation unit information with logistics information if desired and forward transportation required information to a transportation facility 62. Transportation facility 62 may be part of, co-located, separate from, distantly located, or otherwise positioned to manage units in a fleet for delivering inventory from one or more processing facilities 60 to one or more points of sale 57. Forwarding of transportation required information to transportation facility 62 is shown as Step E in FIG. 16. Based at least in part on logistics information delivered in Step C, processing facility, using a stack of trays 44 in accordance with the present invention on a processing line 46, or multiple processing lines 46, packages product 14 into units 10, stores units 10 if desired. This is shown as Step F

in FIG. 16. Based in least in part on logistics information delivered in Step C, at the appropriate time processing facility 60 prepares a shipment of product for the particular point of sale 57. The shipment may contain multiple units of product such as T-bone steaks, ribs, ground beef, pork chops, salmon filets, and other products in various forms and sizes of packaging, at least some of which are manufactured in accordance with the present invention and labeled as desired. This is shown as Step G in FIG. 16. A transportation unit is deployed to processing facility 60 based at least on part of transportation unit information directly from IT facility 58, indirectly from processing facility 60 or otherwise. This is shown as Step H in FIG. 16. In Step I, transportation unit is loaded with shipment of units 10 which is then transported to point of sale 57, unloaded, displayed and sold. Sale information is captured as in Step A and the supply chain or logistics management process continues to manufacture, store, and ship process to multiple points of sale based at least in part on unit 10 sales at the various points of sale.